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## **Gazette Opinion: CHIP stretches dollars to cover more kids**

Even though the CHIP program is 7 years old, most of the families Shawn Hinz sees in need of health coverage for their children never imagined the Montana Children's Health Insurance Program applied to them.

"I think we're still in an introduction phase," said Hinz, who has worked in the Maternal Child Health program for Yellowstone City-County Health Department for 14 years. "A lot of families have heard about CHIP but didn't think it was an option for them."

Other families Hinz works with had been discouraged about applying because for years there was a long wait to get in the program.

Hinz and other "CHIP Champions" are trying to spread the glad tidings: There's room for more Montana Children in CHIP and no waiting list. As of last week, 13,170 Montana children from infants to teens were covered by CHIP. With additional money appropriated by the 2005 Legislature and Gov. Schweitzer, CHIP was estimated to have funds for about 13,900 kids, so there's room for more right now.

The program is expected to expand its capacity this fall with the negotiation of a new contract with BlueCross BlueShield of Montana. The contract change will allow CHIP to shift about \$1 million of its budget to cover additional children, according to Jackie Forba, supervisor for CHIP in Helena. The state has been paying a monthly premium for each child, and BlueCross assumed the risk that the premium would cover the cost of benefits and administration. Starting Oct. 1, the state plans to pay BlueCross for administration only and use the contract savings to cover more needy children.

Hiring BlueCross as a third-party administrator for CHIP is a good move. The Department of Public Health and Human Services should be able to project service costs; it has seven years' worth of data. But it will still need to monitor service expenditures carefully - something program managers have pledged to do.

Many large, private-sector employers use a third-party benefit administrator to handle health insurance claims. Likewise, plans covering Montana state employees and University System employees use third-party administrators. Even Medicaid claims are handled by a third-party administrator. What's good for those programs ought to be good for CHIP, too.

The Gazette State Bureau recently reported that some CHIP advocates want the state to run the entire program and administration, rather than contracting with BlueCross or another entity. The third-party contract is a more reasonable choice. Processing health-care claims correctly and efficiently requires adequate staff, expertise and technology. Starting up a claims processing system from scratch is problematic. Let the pros handle claims.

CHIP enrollment is limited by the dollars budgeted by the Montana Legislature. State dollars cover 20 percent of expenses, with federal funding paying 80 percent. CHIP is a low-cost or no-cost program for eligible Montana families.

When the new contract takes effect Oct. 1, CHIP children will keep the same benefits and the same

provider choices, Forba said. As of August, BlueCross listed 3,999 health care providers in the statewide network serving CHIP children.

Concerned Montanans can help spread this good news. The contact numbers and Internet site listed in the box above ought to be in every school, daycare and PTA newsletter. Churches could put CHIP information in Sunday bulletins, too.

If you, or someone you know, have children without health insurance, don't wait for accident or illness to strike. Check out CHIP. It works for lower-income working families.

## **For more information**

Call Community Health Access in Billings at 247-3290 for information and help to apply for CHIP. The CHAP is a partnership of Yellowstone City-County Health, Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare. It has workers at both hospitals and at Deering Community Health Center to assist with CHIP applications.

Call Shawn Hinz in the Maternal Child Health Program at Yellowstone City-County Health Department, 247-3360.

Call the KidsNow toll-free line at 877-543-7669

Go to the CHIP Web site at <http://chip.mt.gov>

The Children's Health Insurance Program covers otherwise uninsured Montana children from birth to age 19 in families with annual income up to 150 percent of the federal poverty level. What is 150 percent of poverty?

It's \$19,800 for a family of two; \$24,900 for a family of three; \$30,000 for a family of four and higher for larger families. Childcare and work expenses can be deducted from income in determining eligibility.